



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1990 Volume V: American Family Portraits (Section II)

The Black American Family in Literature and Art

Curriculum Unit 90.05.11
by Beverly White

This curriculum unit will investigate the black American family and its roots to give students an awareness of the history of the black family in this country. Many high school students have very sketchy knowledge, if any about the development of the black family in America. They know that black people were held as slaves, that their families were broken apart when slaves were sold, but are unaware that most slaves lived in a nuclear family and slaves, somehow, were able to develop a life for themselves and a culture.

Most students of today are caught up and involved in their own affairs. For the most part, they are not too concerned with school. It is the last item of concern on their agendas. Many of the girls are mothers and have overwhelming responsibilities to the child; they also have jobs, thus school is at the bottom of the list. Because they fail to keep current with their studies their grades suffer and along with that their sense of self-worth.

The knowledge that students will gain from being involved in this unit will give them a sense that they are not alone in their struggle to survive; they can make it. Slaves were able to achieve despite the odds against them. A perfect example of one who was successful in her attempt to better her condition was Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Many of the novels the students will read are satisfying in that they tell stories of black family experiences with which the student can identify. Some of the novels are about real people who somehow were able to pull themselves out of poverty and all of its accompanying difficulties to become accomplished individuals.

One of the goals of this unit is to help students feel better about themselves. This will be accomplished through the activities. When the students work together in groups they will learn how to work cooperatively to accomplish a goal. Their self-esteem will be elevated as they are able to successfully complete relevant assignments.

Another important objective of this curriculum unit is to enable students to analyze, criticize, and evaluate literature, art, photographs, and videotapes in a meaningful manner. High school students have had ample experiences in reading and analyzing literature, but how many can really evaluate a painting or a photograph in terms of being able to look at clothing and surroundings and determine a period in time or have the ability to speculate intelligently about relationships between the pictured individuals. After teaching this unit the instructor would expect that students could effectively analyze literature and especially art and photographs.

History of the Black Family in America

Despite the oppression of slavery, the stable two-parent nuclear family was the norm among pre-Civil War black Americans. Most slaves married and lived with the same spouse until death. Although this was true in several instances slavery did inflict severe hardships on the slave family. Children were frequently sold away from parents and spouses were torn apart. The threat of family break up loomed over the head of every slave family.

Frequently slave husbands and wives lived on separate farms or plantations and were owned by different individuals. This meant that the slave father could only visit his family when permitted to by the master. Some slave fathers tried to visit their families without permission. If caught, they faced often brutal punishment.

Although there were constraints imposed by slavery, slave families succeeded in holding their families together and provided their children with love and wisdom. By raising their own vegetables and providing small game, slaves achieved a small degree of independence. Through the teaching of stories and religion slave parents gave their children the will to endure slavery and transmitted a sense of morality, history, and identity.

Each slave family passed through a series of family life stages. The cycle began with courtship and marriage; however marriage could only take place after obtaining permission from the owner. Southern state laws denied the slaves legal marriage contracts; slaves nevertheless held ceremonies that revealed the seriousness with which they regarded married life.

The next stage of slave family life was devoted to childbearing and child-rearing. Around the age of twenty or twenty-one, either before marriage or afterward the slave woman would bear the first of six or seven children. She most likely would have to face the loss of one or more of her young children; many failed to reach the age of ten.

On the subject of sex, the sexual abuse of slave women was a fact of life. Often they were exploited by their masters and used to breed slaves for sale. Left to its own devices slave sexual behavior was not casual or promiscuous. Slaves followed a set of standards. They did not consider it wrong for a girl to have a child before she married, but soon afterwards she was expected to take a husband. Most slave women bore all their children by the same father and great value was attached to marital fidelity.

Although many slave families consisted of a two-parent nuclear family and the family life presented above represents the development of the slave family under the most favorable conditions, in the vast majority of slave families women headed them. It was not due to any lack of love or concern on the part of males, but with families constantly being broken apart when the plantation was sold or an estate settled, and fathers living on another plantation, the black mother remained the most stable and dependable element during the entire period of slavery. The master's economic interest in the survival of the children caused them to recognize the dependence of young children on their mothers. During slavery the black mother took the responsibility for her family and during this period the traditional role of the woman being the responsible parent took root.

One last fact to note is that although many slaves experienced family destruction and the dispersal of its members, interestingly enough, family and kinship ties were not eroded. The break up of slave families created extended kinship networks which helped slaves adapt to family separations. When children were sold, if any relative lived on that plantation such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, or cousins that family member

would take on the role of parent. If no blood relatives were present then strangers cared for and protected children. Slave children were taught to call all adult slaves “aunt” and “uncle” and to refer to all younger slaves as “brother” and “sister”. Through this means young slaves were taught a sense of community, that all slaves whether related or not, had an obligation to be responsible for others.

Students will learn about the history of the black American family through a series of short lectures with note-taking as a requirement. In addition to the brief lectures and developing the skill of note-taking, I will have the students work in small groups of three to four students to research a specific phase of African American family history such as: Slavery, free blacks in the North and South, the Civil War, the Emancipation, Reconstruction, and the Northern migration. The groups would be responsible for making a presentation to the class on the material they researched. The other students would be required to listen carefully, take notes and ask questions on the topics presented to prepare themselves for a general test on the material.

As I indicated in the introduction, many of the students that I teach have outside activities that they claim hinder them from doing their assignments. Having the research for the presentations done in a group is my attempt at showing the students that I am sympathetic to their plight. Instead of asking individuals to research the whole topic on their own they can share the task with others in their group. I would be giving the students the feeling that I care about them while at the same time the students would be gaining research skills, group dynamics skills, a sense of accomplishment, and better self-esteem.

The students would be shown a combination of filmstrips and videotapes on Slavery, free blacks, the Civil War, the Emancipation, Reconstruction, and the Northern migration to increase their knowledge of these periods. The filmstrips and videotapes may be obtained from the history department in your school or from the Audio-Visual Department at Wexler School.

After listening and taking notes, doing research, viewing filmstrips, and discussing students should be able to pass a test covering the following points:

1. Slave family life prior to the Civil War
2. The constraints placed on slave families
3. How black families survived slavery
4. Free blacks in the South and in the North
5. How families passed on their culture
6. Impact of the Civil War on family life
7. Defining terms—the Emancipation, Reconstruction, and the Migration

Two novels that would fit nicely in this section of the unit would be *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* written by Harriet Jacobs and Alex Haley’s *Roots*.

Life of a Slave Girl is the autobiography of Harriet Jacobs who was born a slave, but managed to escape and eventually became free. Jacobs recounts the history of her family: a remarkable grandmother who hid her from her hated master for seven years; a brother who escaped and became a spokesman for abolition of slavery; her two children whom she rescued from the clutches of slavery by sending them north. Harriet also relates how, as a slave woman, she was degraded sexually: her master doggedly tried to make her his concubine, his jealous wife made Harriet's life miserable, and the white man who fathered her children broke his promise to set them free.

Listed below are a set of questions and topics that could be used for discussion purposes, writing an essay, or for test-taking.

1. Description of Harriet's childhood
- 2 How was Benjamin able to escape slavery?
3. Why would it have been dangerous for him to remain a slave?
4. Describe Dr. Flint. Write a physical description and write about the kind of person he was.
5. What trials did Harriet suffer when she became fifteen?
6. What were slaves taught to think about the North?
7. Discuss Harriet's lover. Why did she become involved with this man?
8. Discuss Dr. Flint's wife. How did she feel about Harriet?
9. The church and the question of slavery
10. Talk about Harriet's grandmother. What was her position on the Flint plantation?
11. How did Harriet escape from Dr. Flint?
12. Where did she hide? How long? How did she manage to go undetected for so long?
13. Aunt Nancy
14. Once Harriet left the South, what incidents took place in Philadelphia?
15. What took place when Harriet visited England?
16. Why did Harriet decide to write the story of her life?
17. Describe the problems and the people involved in getting her book published.

A project in conjunction with *Incidents* would be to have the students write their own autobiographies. They could write about their entire life or select specific incidents about which to write.

Roots by Alex Haley dramatically details slave family life—birth, courtship, marriage, death, and the ever-present fear of being sold off and having to leave your family. The novel covers African family life, how Kunta Kinte is stolen, the Middle Passage experience to America, arrival in America and being sold and life on a plantation. In addition, *Roots* is the story of the Americanization of seven generations of the Kinte clan.

Since *Roots* is such a lengthy novel, I would assign some chapters to be read by the class as outside reading for homework. Periodically I would give announced and unannounced quizzes on the material covered for homework.

I would show some parts from the televised miniseries. *Roots* cannot be rented from the video store because it has not been released on tape yet, but I am sure that a copy can be borrowed from one of the large high schools.

Individual students would be assigned chapters to read outside of class then report on them in class. These students would be expected to answer questions related to their chapter and to clarify any unclear incidents.

I have found that students like to listen to audiotapes of poems and stories, if it is not overdone. Since many of the chapters are short they could be put on tape by me or by good student readers to be used in class with the students listening or reading along in their books. The students who participated in preparing the tapes for class would receive extra English credit. A lesson such as this would help to strengthen student listening skills.

A project for this novel would be to ask the students to interview the oldest member of their family to learn the family history, then write a report based on the interview.

Lesson Plans

I have selected six poems written by Langston Hughes that speak concerning various experiences shared by African American families. The poems can be found in the book listed in the teacher bibliography— *Selected Poems* by Langston Hughes.

Before reading the poems I would ask the students to write a report on Hughes. It is important to know about the author or poet because then you can understand their point of view or where they are coming from.

I would ask that the students include the following information on Hughes in their report:

1. When and where was he born?
2. What types of literature did he write?
3. Give an example of each type. Give the titles of his most famous pieces.
4. What concerns did he express in his writings?
5. Where was Hughes educated?
6. What other jobs did he hold other than writing?
7. How do you think his various experiences were reflected in his writings?
8. When did he die?
9. What honors did he receive?

The poems I have selected would be read and discussed in class. Students would receive a photocopy of each poem. Some poems would be read aloud by the teacher while others would be read by students or silently by the entire class with reactions given after reading.

A. "The Negro Mother"

The narrator in this poem by Langston Hughes speaks for Negro mothers through the ages. She speaks of the injustices done to her and of how she was stolen from her homeland.

I am the one who labored as a slave,
Beaten and mistreated for the work that I gave—
Children sold away from me, husband sold, too.

The Negro mother speaks of having nothing but a dream inside. She had been denied an education and had experienced a multitude of difficulties; however she kept pushing forward. What sustained her was the fact that she could realize her dreams through her children. That indeed someday things would be better.

I nourished the dream that nothing could smother
Deep in my breast—the Negro mother.
I had only hope then, but now through you,
Dark ones of today, my dreams must come true:

After this selection is read by the teacher, the following questions would be used for discussion purposes:

1. Who is the narrator of the selection?
2. Of whom does the narrator speak?
3. For whom does she speak?
4. How did her people get to America?
5. What hardships did they have to endure in the new land?
6. What was the one sustaining factor in their lives?
7. What dreams does the narrator have for her children?
8. What dreams do your parents have for you?
9. What are your future plans?

B. "Afro-American Fragment"

After the students have completed silent reading of the poem ask them for their reactions. *Atavistic* is probably an unfamiliar word so students should look up the definition, then a discussion would be held to clarify the meaning, and how it is used in the selection.

The following study questions may be used:

1. What does Hughes mean when he says that Africa is so far away?
2. Is he speaking only of the physical distance?
3. Does this poem have any rhythm?
4. What do you think creates the rhythms?
5. What words are repeated?
6. What is the effect of the repetitions?

C. "Aunt Sue's Stories"

A student who is proficient in reading will be assigned to read this poem aloud. The aim of this lesson is that students understand that adult family members give younger members a sense of history and identity through the telling of stories. It was this practice that helped pass the culture of the African American from one generation to the next.

The following is a list of study questions that may be used:

1. What does the second line tell that is different from the first line?
2. What does it add to the poem?
3. How can shadows cross stories?
4. Where are Aunt Sue's stories told?
5. What is significant about the location?
6. Why is the child quiet?
7. Is there anyone in your family like Aunt Sue?

As an extended activity for number seven, students could be asked to tell one of their family stories or write the story. No student would be pressured into telling their family secrets. All written materials submitted to the teacher would be confidential. The story could be humorous or serious; however I would encourage the funny stories.

D. "Mama and Daughter"

This selection by Langston Hughes speaks of man and woman relationships. I believe that this poem will elicit a great deal of animated discussion from especially the girls. I believe that they all can relate to this poem. Here are some lines that would probably be very familiar sounding to the students.

Who is your sugar, honey?
Turn around—I'll brush behind.
He is that young man, mama,
I can't get off my mind.

In the conversation between the mother and daughter, the mother relates her personal story of her relationship with the girl's father. Underlying the story is some advice for her daughter to be careful because the same thing could happen to her.

Your father, yes, he was the one!
I felt like that about him.
But it was a long time ago
He up and went his way.

Listed below are some discussion questions for "Mama and Daughter."

1. How is this poem written differently from the others we've read?
2. What experience is shared by mother and daughter?
3. The mother's advice to her daughter is implied. What is it? What advice do you get from your parents?

E. "Share-Croppers"

When slavery ended some slave families stayed on the plantations to work the land for a share of the crop they raised. This system of "share-cropping" was little better than slavery because the slave family was cheated by the landowner and left in debt year after year never being able to get ahead. In the following lines Hughes relates the idea of the former slaves being deceived.

Leaves us hungry, ragged
As we were before.
Year by year goes by
And we are nothing more . . .

Hughes drives home the point that these farm workers are thought of as animals with no human feelings.

Just a herd of Negroes
Driven to the field,
Plowing, planting, hoeing,
To make the cotton yield.

Below are listed some study questions for the Hughes poem "Share-Croppers".

1. How are the Negro workers perceived by their employer?
2. What do the words *herd* and *driven* suggest?
3. Describe the overall tone of this poem.

F. "Harlem"

This selection will be read by the teacher and discussed further in connection with the play, *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry.

Students might have difficulty with the meaning of the words *deferred* and *fester*. Dictionary work would be appropriate here.

The following study questions may be used with this poem:

1. What six things happen to a dream deferred?
2. Explain each one then try to relate each happening to a real life experience.

Lesson Plans

Before reading *A Raisin in the Sun* I would direct the students to do research on the life of the author, Lorraine Hansberry. The student's reports should contain the following similar information along with other facts they discover while doing research.

1. Was Hansberry a talented writer? How do you know?
2. Would you describe her life as bittersweet? Why?
3. What were some of her other works?

When the reports are brought in I would play Aretha Franklin's rendition of "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black". Students should be aware that this work was done by Hansberry.

A. Act I-Scene One will be read in class by the teacher and students. If it is not completed during class time students may complete the reading for homework.

B. Activity Sheet for Act I-Scene One

1. What is the setting of the play (time and place)?
2. Describe the Younger apartment and its furnishings.
3. Describe the members of the family. (personality and appearance)
 - a. Ruth
 - b. Walter
 - c. Beneatha
 - d. Mama
 - e. Travis
4. Do you see evidence of problems in the marriage of Ruth and Walter? What are they?
5. What dreams do the family members have?
6. What will enable their hopes to become a reality?

At this point students would be asked to bring in photographs of their homes inside and out for purposes of comparison/contrast with where the Youngers live. If no pictures are available students could bring in pictures out of a magazine. The discussion could possibly lead to what they want in life. This would give the teacher an excellent opportunity to talk about preparing oneself in order to earn the money to purchase those finer things in life.

C. Act I-Scene Two will be read in class with students taking the parts of the characters. When the reading has been completed, probably the next day a quiz would be given.

Quiz Questions

1. Discuss the new character Asagai.
2. How do Beneatha and Asagai feel about each other? Give proof from the play to support your answers.
3. How do Mama, Beneatha, and Ruth herself react to news of Ruth's pregnancy?
4. Why does Mama seem to be unhappy when she receives the check for ten thousand dollars?
5. What plans does Walter have for Mama's money?
6. How does Walter react when he is told that Ruth is thinking of getting an abortion?

Two activities for Scene Two would be to have the class listen to a cassette of saxophone blues by a musician of the forties or fifties. A discussion of the abortion issue would fit in here.

D. The remaining portions of the play will be read in class with individual students reading the parts of the characters. Students will continue to discuss plot and character development. The following list may be used for discussion, writing or a test:

1. What happened to Mama's check?
2. Contrast the personalities and views of George Murchinson with those of Joseph Asagai.
3. Describe the relationship between Mama and Walter.
4. Discuss Mama as the strong matriarchal black woman.
5. How does the family leadership change?
6. How does the loss of the money affect the various family members?
7. How does the play conclude? Relate the events.

E. Activities

1. In connection with Act II-Scene One play African music and then invite a speaker to talk on traditional native dress. The speaker would be asked to come to class in native dress and to bring some examples of the clothing.

2. Students could bring in some examples of African and African American food to be sampled by the class.
3. Students would perform skits depicting scenes of their choice from the play.
4. Show the videotape of *A Raisin in the Sun* . You could show the black and white version available in the video stores starring Sidney Poitier, or the most recent PBS television production starring Danny Glover and Esther Rolle.

Lesson Plans

Students will be shown a series of paintings and photographs on the opaque projector of black family situations. They will be asked questions leading them to form some generalizations about the piece. These lessons would prepare students for fieldtrips to art galleries, museums and historical societies. They would be able to ask intelligent questions and have some idea of what to look for in a painting or photograph.

A Slave Mother is a painting that I discovered in *Domestic Revolutions : A Social History of American Family Life* by Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg. The plantation family is a photograph found in Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery & Freedom . Visit from White Mistress* (1876) by Winslow Homer can be found in *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710-1940* . *Visit* is a painting. These books are listed in the teacher bibliography and are excellent sources for paintings or photographs to be used along with this section of the unit. The study questions are examples that could be used to get the students thinking about what they are viewing.

1. *A Slave Mother* Each year in the antebellum era, approximately a thousand slaves fled northward to escape bondage. Most walked on foot, traveling at night, and slept in barns or woods. Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave, killed two of her children rather than permit them to be returned to slavery. After her capture by slave catchers, she drowned herself in the Ohio River. ¹

Discussion Questions

- a. What period in history is this?
- b. What do you think has happened?
- c. Notice the child. What is he doing?
- d. What does the mother seem to be saying?

- e. Is she afraid?
 - f. What does her posture suggest?
 - g. Who are the male figures?
 - h. What seems to be their reaction?
2. The photograph of the family on the plantation shows several generations of a slave family. ²
- Discussion Questions
- a. Do the members of this family seem to care about each other?
 - b. How are they dressed?
 - c. What does this tell you about their economic status?
 - d. Describe their home.
 - e. See if you can find the grandparents, the parents, the children, etc.
3. *Visit from White Mistress* shows the white mistress at the cabin door of some slave women and their children. ³
- Discussion Questions
- a. Why has the mistress come to the slave's cabin?
 - b. Are the women happy to see her? How do you know this?
 - c. Contrast the clothing worn by the white woman with that worn by the black women.
 - d. There are no men in the cabin. How would you account for their absence?
4. Fieldtrips
- a. The Yale Art Gallery, Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut
 - b. The Schomburg Center, New York City
 - c. Black Historical Society, Orchard Street, New Haven, Connecticut
5. Project

Students will be asked to put together a pictorial booklet in which they will write about their families and place photographs of family members past/present and group situations with captions written under each picture naming the individual(s) and the activity.

Notes

1. Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), p. 50.
2. Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery & Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), p. 1.
3. Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History : The Black Image In American Art , 1710-1940* (Washington, D. C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990).

Student Bibliography

Baldwin, James. *Go Tell it on the Mountain* . New York. Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1953.

A family in Harlem is the focal point of this novel. It is also the story of the youngest son, a sensitive boy making the passage to manhood, searching for his identity.

———. *If Beale Street Could Talk* . New York: The Dial Press, 1974.

This is a love story of two young people, and of the love of their families, and of their struggle in a world filled with hate.

Brown, Claude. *Manchild in the Promised Land* . New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965.

Claude Brown is a black man who made it out of the ghetto to become a law student at one of America's leading universities.

Haley, Alex. *Roots* . New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1976.

This novel recounts the family history of seven generations of the Kunta Kinte clan.

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun* . New York: Random House, Inc., 1958.

This is a play about a family which bares their hopes and hungers; while it reveals their courage and strength.

Jacobs, Harriet A. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* . London, England: Harvard University Press, 1987.

An account of Harriet Jacobs life in slavery.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye* . New York: Washington Square Press, 1970.

The poignant story of a young girl who yearns to be beautiful and noticed. When someone finally does the results are tragic.

Parks, Gordon. *The Learning Tree* . New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1963.

This novel shows the inner lives of a black family as they struggle to understand the challenges of their special world.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* . New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1981.

Published in 1852, this novel brought the abolitionists' message to the world. It is valuable as a portrayal of the slave experience.

Toomer, Jean. *Cane* . New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1975.

A collection of short stories linked together by their depiction of Negro life in the South.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1945.

Autobiography of what Richard Wright thought and felt growing up as a "black boy" in the South.

Teacher Bibliography

Anshen, Ruth Nanda. *The Family : Its Function and Destiny* . New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1959.

Technical book on the function of the family and where it is heading.

Bane, Mary Jo. *Here To Stay: American Families in the Twentieth Century* . New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976.

This book refutes the notion that the American family is on the decline.

Franklin, Franklin E. *The Free Negro Family* . Nashville, Tennessee: Fisk University Press, 1932.

Factual information on how free blacks lived in the North and the South.

Gutman, Herbert G. *The Black Family in Slavery & Freedom , 1750-1925*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.

A comprehensive study of the black family in America.

Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems* . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1959.

A collection of poems selected by Hughes shortly before his death.

———. *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* . Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1967. An anthology of

short stories dating from 1899 to 1967.

McElroy, Guy C. *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art , 1710-1940* . Washington, D. C. Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990.

Fantastically beautiful source of Black American Art from the eighteenth to the twentieth century!

Mintz, Steven and Kellogg, Susan. *Domestic Revolutions : A Social History of American Family Life* . New York: The Free Press, 1988.

A very readable book of American family life. Has a good selection of photographs of various ethnic groups.

Simpson, Jeffrey. *The American Family : A History in Photographs* . New York: The Viking Press, 1976.

An excellent collection of photographs covering the 1800's to the 1970's.

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